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THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR: A SUPERPOWER MIRED IN THE MOUNTAINS

by Lester W. Grau, Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

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The Soviet-Afghan War involved more than the Soviets and Mujahideen resistance. Afghan communists (the DRA) were involved in the immediate struggle and a large number of countries supplied the Mujahideen during this "Cold War" hot war. Their struggle and their lessons are outlined. The author does not usually write without footnotes, but he wrote this article during a trip to Iraq and lacked his reference library. Needless to say, he drew on his knowledge about the war and the knowledge he gained from noted authorities on the subject. These include Ali Jalali, Barnett Rubin, Riaz Khan, Mohammad Youssaf, Brace Amstutz, Artem Borovik, Aleksandr Lyakhovskiy, Aleksandr Mayorov, Scott McMichael, Makhmut Gareev, David Isby, Boris Gromov, Rasul Rais, and Louis Dupree.

Soaring mountains dominate Afghanistan and shape its culture, history, social structure, customs, politics and economy. Vast, trackless deserts, mighty rivers and lush cropland further define this remote country. Militarily, the operational key terrain is the limited road network that connects its cities in a giant ring with side roads to Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. There are only 24 kilometers of railroad in Afghanistan--and these are split in two unconnected segments--leftover spurs from the former Soviet Union's incursion. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, many countries offered to build railroads in Afghanistan, but Afghanistan was bordered to the north by the Russian Empire, to the East by the British Empire and to the West by Persia, heir to the late Persian Empire. The rulers of Afghanistan noted that the armies of empire traveled on rail and no railroads were built in Afghanistan. Militarily, this was probably a wise choice, but it exacted a severe economic and political price. To this day, Afghanistan is one of the most poverty-stricken and isolated countries on the planet.

There are some eternal truths about Afghanistan. First, it is a fragmented land in which a strong central government is an anomaly. Tribal chiefs and regional warlords exert considerable power and the central government requires extraordinary leadership to control and dominate its unruly regions. Rural Afghans think of themselves primarily in tribal and peer group [*qwam*] terms, not as Afghans. The one event that unites all Afghans in a common cause is foreign invasion. The central government's army has seldom been strong enough to repel external invasion, but the

country's true combat power lies in the rural lands and remote mountains where warriors hold sway.

Second, combat in the mountainous regions is seasonal. In November, the snows fall, closing the mountain passes and forcing the people down into the valleys where they winter over. Little fighting occurs, except in the low desert regions. In March and April, the snows begin to melt and combatants begin to stir. May and June are excellent months for combat. July and August are too hot and the pace of combat slows. September and October are again excellent months for combat. And in November, the snows fall.

Third, combat in Afghanistan has a certain logic to it. Battles between Afghans are never fought "to the knife" where one side attempts to annihilate the other completely. Rather, when it is apparent that one side is winning, the other side kicks out a rear guard and melts into the mountains. The rear guard, the slow and the uninformed take the bulk of the casualties. When foreigners invade Afghanistan, however, the Afghans are capable of annihilation combat. The British "Army of the Indus" that perished between Kabul and Gandamak in 1842 and the British "Burrows Brigade" that was wiped out at Maiwand in 1880 are two prime examples.

Fourth, personal loyalty is primarily to family, *qwaṁ* [social, school or trade group] and tribe. Higher loyalty to cause and regional or national leaders is situational. Units may change sides in battle when the other side is winning. A common perception is that the other side is winning because it is God's will and one should not oppose God's will. Temporary truces and alliances are common. Loyalty can be rented, but the term length of the rental is uncertain.

Background

Afghanistan of the 1970s was a fairly liberal Islamic country. *Purdah* was rare in the cities and one saw more women in miniskirts than in *Burqahs*. In Kabul, discos blared country and eastern music until early in the morning. Literacy rates were low, perhaps 10%. The power of the mullahs and imams was restricted to religious matters. Secular leaders controlled the country, provinces, districts, cities and villages. Tribal power was strong, but challenged by the increasing urbanization of the country. There was an inherent friction between the more-liberal urban populace and the conservative rural community. Before he was deposed, the king was working to modernize and enlighten the country—an effort that did not always sit well with the rural and religious community.

Afghanistan is an ethnically diverse society with a Pashtu, Uzbek, Tajik, Hazara and Nuristani populace. The primary languages are Pashtun and Dari. Turkmen, Tajik, Uzbek, and Baluch are also spoken. The country is overwhelmingly Islamic with the majority being Sunni. The Hazara are Shia and closely affiliated with neighboring Iran. The country has a strong Sufi tradition, but during the Soviet-Afghan War, Wahhabism and Deobandism made strong inroads due to substantial external financial contributions to the cause.

Afghanistan has a traditional warrior society and a strong sense of independence. Male children receive a firearm before their teens and learn to use it. Most men carry a weapon. Still, rifle marksmanship is not all that good, particularly since the introduction of the Kalashnikov assault

rifle. Further, their weapons handling is casual and muzzles point everywhere—an unfortunate habit only partially alleviated by the fact that there is seldom a round in the weapon's chamber. The independent nature of the people means that they are reluctant to accept military discipline. They can be fierce warriors but indifferent soldiers.

The northern part of Afghanistan, bordering the Soviet Union, was a major agricultural area. The river valleys were also fertile and productive. Agriculture products were Afghanistan's major exports. Truckloads of melons, grapes, wheat, apples, nuts and even rice crossed the borders of Pakistan and Iran.

The Soviet Union had a long and fairly friendly relationship with its southern neighbor. Afghanistan was the first nation to recognize the Soviet Communist regime after the Bolshevik Revolution. Modest amounts of Soviet aid, accompanied by Soviet advisers, entered Afghanistan in the 1920s and were a constant feature in Afghanistan during the next fifty-plus years. One of the best country studies and military appreciations on Afghanistan was published in 1921 by Andrey E. Snesev, a Tsarist and Soviet general who had toured the area extensively (and spoke 14 languages). In 1930, the Soviets briefly invaded northern Afghanistan in hot pursuit of a fleeing Uzbek leader.

Turkey and Germany also sought influence and advantage in Afghanistan. Turkish and German military advisers helped train the Afghan Army. During World War II, German Abwehr and Soviet NKVD agents conducted a deadly contest in Kabul. The Abwehr lost. The United States belatedly tried for influence in Afghanistan following World War II. President Eisenhower even paid a brief visit to the country in 1956. Both the United States and the Soviet Union contributed economic aid and embarked on a series of infrastructure development projects in the 1960s and 1970s. The Soviet Union built airfields and roads in the northern part of the country, including the world's highest traffic tunnel--the Salang tunnel—a marvel of engineering stretching two miles and allowing transit of the rugged Hindu Kush mountains. The Soviets also developed the Kabul river irrigation project south of Jalalabad. The United States built roads in the south of the country and the Kandahar airfield as well as the extensive Helmand basin irrigation project. The Chinese were also competing—with an extensive irrigation system near Charikar. Thousands of Afghan officials, officers and students studied in the Soviet Union.

In July 1973, Prime Minister Daoud overthrew his cousin, the king, and set himself up as the President of Afghanistan. The shift from monarchy to a parliamentary system was not unopposed. Students dropped out of school and took to the mountains as guerrillas opposing the new president. They joined guerrillas who had started by opposing the reforms of the king. These isolated *Mujahideen* [holy warriors] would later become the basis for nation-wide resistance.

In the 1970s, communism and nationalism were sweeping the planet. The West was in retreat as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia became communist. Revolutionary Iran threw the west out of the country, the Middle East was in chaos and Chile, Argentina and El Salvador were tottering on the brink of joining the communist camp. The future looked red and uninspired US leadership did little to rally the West. The Soviet Union was clearly in ascendancy and Soviet military internationalists were in Cuba,

Vietnam, Laos, Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique, Congo, Egypt, Syria and Latin America. The Soviet Union was supporting revolutionary cells in West Germany, Italy, Spain, France and Japan and providing financial aid to Western communist parties. Communist espionage had thoroughly penetrated the West.

Daoud's regime did not last long. In April 1978, Daoud was overthrown by a communist coup engineered by army and air force officers who had studied in the Soviet Union. The emergent Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) was poorly run by a faction-ridden communist party. The new government announced ill-conceived, broad-sweeping reforms that alienated large sections of the populace, yet did little to implement them—alienating the remaining section of the populace that might have supported them. In 1979, Prime Minister Amin assassinated President Taraki. Taraki was Moscow's man and Amin was not. Amin continued to request Soviet aid, including military intervention to help fight the growing Mujahideen threat. However, Amin did not accept orders from Moscow as readily as his predecessor. The DRA was spinning out of control and Moscow intended to do something about it. They decided to eliminate Amin and put their own candidate in power while using a seemingly reluctant intervention to aid the DRA fight against the Mujahideen as cover. It was a successful cover. The DRA General Staff cooperated with the Soviet General Staff in planning the entry of the initial three-division Soviet force. It was a brilliant operation. At the cost of 66 Soviet dead (44 due to accidents), the Soviets controlled the cities and government of Afghanistan. Their plan was to hold the cities, garrisons, and airfields while the Armed Forces of the DRA combated the Mujahideen in the countryside. They anticipated that they would be there for two or three years. Little did they imagine that they were now involved in the middle of a civil war on extremely rugged terrain where the Soviets, not the DRA, would carry the bulk of the combat burden.

The Initial Insurgency

The Soviets invaded in December and there was little initial resistance. However, with the spring thaw, resistance began to mount. Initially, tribal leaders assembled large armies (*lashkars*) that marched on the Soviet garrisons. They were easy targets for Soviet artillery and air power. It became very clear to the tribal leaders that large tribal armies could not oppose the Soviets and DRA, but that guerrilla warfare offered possibilities. They turned to the Mujahideen who were already conducting guerrilla war.

Pre-invasion Soviet military planning estimated that they would need 30-35 divisions to conquer and control Afghanistan completely. It soon became clear that the initial three Soviet divisions were inadequate. Eventually, the Soviets fielded five and 2/3rds division equivalents in Afghanistan. They needed far more, however, this was the maximum amount that could be supplied over the over-burdened Afghan road network. Soviet efforts to use theater logistics from the Soviet military districts broke down at the Afghan border.

The Soviet Union had a good deal of experience with guerrilla warfare. During the 1920s and 1930s, they conducted a successful counterinsurgency in Central Asia against the *Basmachi*. During World War II, the Soviet Union fielded and directed the largest partisan force ever deployed in wartime. Following World War II, the Soviets conducted another successful

counterinsurgency in the Ukraine. Yet, when the Soviets entered Afghanistan, they were unprepared to conduct a counterinsurgency in this theater. Their divisions were designed for conventional war against NATO or China, so they had all their tanks, chemical defense and air defense units with them. The Soviet intention was to hold the operational key terrain and ward off the hostile neighboring states of Pakistan and Iran. The Armed Forces of the DRA were supposed to fight the counterinsurgency. However, as the countryside rose in revolt, it became obvious that the DRA could not handle the counterinsurgency alone and that the Soviets would have to participate--as the main partner.

The initial Mujahideen resistance to the Soviets was based on a popular uprising. Hundreds of small bands took to the field. The guerrillas were local and their leaders were local--village chiefs, tribal leaders, prominent family elders. The revolt was secular and the leadership was secular. The local mullahs and imams might accompany the guerrillas, but seldom in a leadership role. Since the guerrillas were local, the support base was built in. Food, water, shelter and medical aid were readily available and the neighbors provided intelligence on Soviet and DRA movements. The guerrilla's weapons were what they had on hand--primarily WWI-era British Lee-Enfield.303 bolt-action rifles and older British Martini-Henry single-shot breech-loading rifles from the 1880s. Lucky units seized DRA district headquarters, looting their arms rooms and liberating AK-47 Kalashnikov assault rifles and some machine guns.

Belatedly the Soviets addressed the insurgency. Despite their past experience, they had forgotten their history. They read Mao Tse Tung's aphorism "the guerrilla is the fish that swims in the ocean of the people". The Soviets decided that the way to isolate the fish was to drain the ocean. The Soviet Air Force, which had readily ripped apart the Afghan *lashgars*, was useless against a guerrilla that it could not target. However, the air force could readily target irrigation systems, orchards, cropland, farms, villages and livestock. The air force went after the Mujahideen support structure.

At this time, Afghanistan was a country of approximately 17 million people. Most were rural. Soviet bombing drove 5.5 million people out of the country and into refugee camps in bordering Pakistan and Iran. Another 2.2 million became "internal refugees" crowding into the shantytowns and the suburbs of Afghanistan's cities to escape the Soviet Air Force. The guerrilla now had to carry his weapon, ammunition, food and water with him. If he was hurt, his closest medical support might be in Pakistan or Iran. The rural social system was turned upside down and the guerrilla's support base was being closed down.

The Soviets soon learned that they did not want to be within 300 meters of the Mujahideen. The 300-meter mark represents the maximum effective range of the Kalashnikov assault rifle, the RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launcher against a moving target and is well within the danger close area of supporting artillery and air power. The Mujahideen preferred the flat trajectory fight where the bulk of Soviet combat power was negated. Where possible, the Soviets bulldozed orchards, villages and other cover and concealment some 300 meters back from both sides of the road to create stand-off and aid in counter-ambush.

The Insurgency Matures

The insurgency was in trouble. The Mujahideen were unpaid volunteers who provided their own weapons and food. Their support base was being driven out of the countryside and, in places, it was difficult to get close enough to the Soviets to engage them effectively. They needed weapons with greater ranges and supplies.

Afghanistan's neighbors were uneasy about the Soviet incursion. Pakistan, bracketed by India and Afghanistan was particularly threatened, since archenemy India was a close friend of the Soviet Union. Pakistan lost Bangladesh in the 1973 war and consequently recast itself from a secular to an Islamic state as a defensive move against India. Pakistan became an Islamic Republic to gain world-wide Islamic support to offset India's overwhelming advantages in manpower and economic viability. Iran was also threatened, particularly since they were fighting a bloody war with Iraq, a good customer and friend of the Soviet Union. Pakistan and Iran began providing aid to the Mujahideen. The United States, Peoples Republic of China, Britain, France, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates began funneling military and humanitarian aid to the Mujahideen through Pakistan. Pakistan's assessment was that the Soviet Union had come to Afghanistan to stay and it was in Pakistan's best interest to support those Mujahideen who would never accept the Soviet presence. The Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) began to funnel aid through various Afghan political factions headquartered in Pakistan. Eventually there were seven major Afghan factions receiving aid. The politics of these factions were determined by their leaders' religious convictions--three of which were Islamic moderates and four of which were Islamic fundamentalists. Pakistan required that the various ethnic and tribal Mujahideen groups join one of the factions in order to receive aid. The Pakistanis favored the most fundamentalist groups and rewarded them accordingly. This aid gave Afghan clerics accompanying the Mujahideen unprecedented power in the conduct of the war and undermined the traditional authority of the tribal and village chiefs.

The seven factions in Pakistan were:

- The Afghanistan National Liberation Front (ANLF)--Jebh-e-Nejat-i-Melli Afghanistan was a moderate party founded by Sebqhatullah Mojadeddi. Primarily secular, it drew from the tribes, the old social order and the Sufi orders of the South. Its strength was in Kunar and Paktia provinces. It has Deobandi links.
- The Islamic Party (HIH)--Hezb-e-Islamie-i-Gulbuddin founded in 1974 to fight the Daoud government. It later split as cofounders Rabanni and Khalis founded their own factions. Its leader, Gulbuddin Hikmatyar is a fundamentalist internationalist Pashtun. His radical Islamist party recruited heavily from among the government secular school and Kabul religious school graduates. Hikmatyar's party received more outside aid from Pakistan, the United States and Saudi Arabia than any other party. Its strength was in Nuristan, Nangrahar and around Kabul.
- Islamic Party (HIK)--Hezb-e-Islami-Khalis was founded by Mawlawi Mohammed Yunis Khalis who left Afghanistan for Pakistan in 1973 after the Daoud coup. Khalis is from Nangrahar Province and is very anti-Shia. His most famous commanders included Abdul Haq in Kabul, Haji Abdul Qadir in Nangrahar and Jalladuddin Hagani of Paktia Province. The party is fundamentalist moderate. Its recruits came from graduates of government schools, religious schools of the Gilzai, Khugiangi and Jadran tribes as well

as the Kabul and Kandahar regions. It also drew a lot of army deserters. Its strength was in Nangrahar, Kabul, Kunar, Lowgar and Wardak provinces.

- Islamic Revolutionary Movement (IRMA)--Harakat-e-Inqilab-i-Islami was founded by Mohammad Nabi Mohammadi. The party is moderate (traditional Islamist) and primarily Pashtun. It drew recruits from the private seminaries, liberal intellectuals, and the Andar, Gilhzai, Mahmud, Hotak, and Durrani tribes. Its strength was in Lowgar Province and the Helmand valley. General Yahyah Nawroz was one of its most famous commanders.
- Islamic Society (JIA)—Jamiat-i-Islami was founded by a Tajik, Burhanud-din Rabbani, who fled to Pakistan in 1974. His most famous commanders were Ahmed Shah Masood in the Panjshir valley and Ismail Khan in Herat Province. The party is primarily moderate fundamentalist and dominated by ethnic Tajiks, but has Uzbeks and Pashtun in its ranks. Its recruits came from the religious and secular government schools and northern Sunni religious schools and northern Sufi brotherhoods. Its strength was in northern Afghanistan. It had members throughout Afghanistan but was particularly strong in Lowgar, Samangan, Faryab, Farah and Nimroz provinces.
- Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan (IUA)—Ittihad-I-Islami was founded by Abd Al-Rab Abdul-Rassul Sayyaf. This used to be called the Etehad-e Islami (EIA) until 1981. The faction is militant fundamentalist and anti-Shia. In the mid-1980s, they again changed their name to the Islamic Union of Afghanistan. The IUA was heavily financed by the Wahhabi sect out of Saudi Arabia. Sayyaf was known for recruiting motivated Arab youths for jihad in his organization.
- National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (NIFA)--Mahaz-e-Melli was founded by Pir Sayed Ahmad Gailani. This moderate party attracted a number of former officers from the Afghan Army and moderate technocrats. This royalist party recruited from the landed aristocracy, the tribes and the Sufi brotherhood. The primary power base came from the Zadran, Mangal, Jaji, Ahmadzai, Tareen, Kochi, and Sulemankhel tribes. The party was primarily Pashtun and its strength was in Paktia, Paktika, Ghazni and Kandahar provinces.

There were four factions headquartered in Iran. They were smaller, less well-supplied, primarily Shia and their strength was in the Hazara-section of Afghanistan (the Hazarajat). They were:

- Revolutionary Council of the Islamic Union of Afghanistan-Shura-i Inqilab-i Ittifagh-i Islami-i Afghanistan was a traditionalist Shia party led by Sayyad Beheshti. It recruited among the Hazara peasants and social elite. Many defecting Afghan Army officers led its ranks. It had wide support in the Hazarajat and Ghazni Province.
- The Islamic Victory Organization of Afghanistan-Sazman-i Nasr-i Islami-yi Afghanistan was a radical Islamist party led by a council that recruited from young Hazara who were educated in Iran. This pro-Iran party was headquartered in Daykundi.
- Islamic Movement (HI)--Harakat-i-Islami was founded by Ayatollah Asef Muhsini in Iran as a Shia faction. The party has a traditional Islamic orientation. It recruited educated Shia from all ethnic groups. Its most famous commander was Mohammad Anwari who fought in the Turkmen valley west of Kabul.
- Army of the Guardians of the Revolution--Sepah-i Pasdaran is a radical Islamist party led by Akbari and Saddiqi. It had very close ties with the Iranian government. It had few fighters but drew from clerics who were disaffected with Beheshti's Shura.

The Mujahideen were unpaid volunteers with family responsibilities. This meant that they were part-time warriors and the spoils of war played a major role in military actions. Usually, one-fifth of the booty taken in an ambush belonged to the ambush commander and the remainder was divided among the participants. Mujahideen sold captured weapons and equipment in the bazaars to support their families. As the war progressed, mobile Mujahideen groups emerged. The mobile Mujahideen groups were larger and consisted of young (under 25), unmarried, better-trained warriors. Sometimes the mobile Mujahideen were paid. The mobile Mujahideen ranged over a much larger area of operations than the local Mujahideen and were more responsive to the plans and desires of the factions.

The United States and Britain gave their aid in the form of weapons, equipment and supplies. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates gave their aid in the form of cash. Often the aid that was available was inappropriate for the individual Mujahideen commander. For example, a commander might arrive in Pakistan seeking anti-tank mines, only to discover that no anti-tank mines were available, but heavy machine gun ammunition was being distributed. The commander might have no heavy machine guns, but he would take the ammunition anyway and take it down to the bazaar and sell it. There would be a resultant hue and cry that the Mujahideen were selling aid for personal gain. Actually, what usually happened was that the commander would then take the money to buy the anti-tank mines at the bazaar, where everything always seemed to be available.

Transporting weapons, ammunition and supplies was also a challenge. Pick-up trucks, mules (in the mountains) and camels (in the desert) were optimum supply transport for the Mujahideen. As the supply convoy would move from one tribal area to another, the tribe would exact a 10% toll on the goods. Transport was paid for in advance. Since the US and Britain gave no cash aid which could be used for transport fees, additional supplies were sold to pay for transport. Some Mujahideen groups tried to organize their own transport units, but quickly discovered that the local teamsters were strong and aggressive enough to make this an unviable option. Local teamsters hauled for the Mujahideen. As with all teamsters, negotiations were part of the process. The commander may want his supplies delivered to point A. However, no teamster likes to "run bobtail" and wants a return load. The teamster might want to deliver to point B instead, where he could pick up lumber, lapis lazuli, heroin or whatever the return cargo was.

Commanders were responsible for losses of transport mules, trucks and camels to Soviet actions. Soviet helicopter gunships were quick to attack pack animals and trucks. The introduction of heavy weaponry created a surge in the demand for transport, but there was a decrease, rather than an increase, in available transport.

By 1984, there were clearly not enough mules to meet the needs of the insurgency. The United States responded by buying large numbers of American mules to ease the crisis. The American mules were flown over to Pakistan, but there were still problems. The American mules were much bigger than the locals and ate twice as much as the locals. They also carried less--and they began to die from the many virulent diseases endemic to Afghanistan. Attempts to import other pack animals from around the Middle East were not much more successful.

The Mature Insurgency

The Mujahideen were forced to build a series of supply depots, supply points and forward supply points inside Afghanistan to ease their logistics dilemma. They established these in remote, inaccessible areas in mountains and canyons. Tora Bora, Zhawar and the Sharikot valley are prime examples. These sites aided supply but cost the Mujahideen mobility since they were forced to defend them. These sites gave the Soviets something to target.

The Soviets were not having an easy time of it either. The Soviets found that it took some 85% of their force and DRA forces to provide basic security--guarding cities, industry, airfields, garrisons and outposts along the supply routes from the Soviet Union. This left 15% of the force available to go after the Mujahideen. The forces that fought the Mujahideen were primarily airborne, air assault and Spetsnaz. The two Spetsnaz brigades' primary mission was convoy and caravan interdiction.

Soviet forces were bleeding in Afghanistan, but the biggest threat was disease. Over 60% of the Soviet service personnel were hospitalized for disease during their normal two-year tour of duty. Shigellosis, amoebiasis, typhus, cholera, hepatitis, and other water-borne diseases plagued the force. Malaria was also a problem. However, Soviet casualties and disease were hidden from the Soviet people. The Soviet media did an effective job limiting the reporting on Afghanistan to positive events. The Soviet military also kept non-accredited foreign journalists at bay. Further, the hazardous trip inside and the lengthy process to get the story out discouraged most Western journalists from covering the war effectively. Most preferred long-range reporting from Pakistan, relying on press releases from the factions.

Mujahideen offensive tactics included the ambush, the raid, the shelling attack, mine warfare, attacks on strong points, blocking lines of communication and conducting sieges. Mujahideen defensive tactics included defending against raids, fighting helicopter insertions, defending against a cordon and search, defending base camps, counter ambush and fighting in encirclement. They also developed a set of tactics for the urban guerrilla.

Soviet offensive tactics included the combined-arms attack, the advance to contact, the cordon and search, the air assault, the base camp siege, the base camp attack, the clearing attack, the raid, the ambush, the artillery offensive, air interdiction and encirclement. Soviet defensive tactics included mine warfare, march and convoy escort, strong-point defense, patrolling and mobile defense.

By 1984, the war was primarily a logistics war with each side trying to strangle the other's logistics while striving to stay supplied and viable. The war was stalemated, but no one in the Soviet Politburo was making any decisions during the "twilight of the General Secretaries". Brezhnev, Chernenko, Andropov--one infirm Soviet leader after another tottered slowly to their deaths. Finally in 1985, a comparative youngster, Mikhail Gorbachev, came to power. Shortly after his assumption of power, the Soviet military launched the bloodiest fighting of the war. The Mujahideen were badly battered and close to breaking, but the Soviets did not

realize it. In 1986, Gorbachev announced “Afghanization” of the war and the eventual withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan. Soviet combat fell off significantly.

By 15 February 1989, the last of the Soviet combat forces had withdrawn from Afghanistan. However, confident predictions that the DRA would soon collapse after the withdrawal were not realized. The DRA outlasted the Soviet Union. The faction-ridden Mujahideen had difficulty converting from a guerrilla force to a conventional force to defeat the DRA.

Mujahideen Lessons Learned

1. Guerrilla warfare is a long-term proposition. Persistence and patience are required for victory. The occupier must be worn-down and demoralized. The battle can be won politically in the homeland of the occupier. Survival is more important than tactical victory.
2. The impact of high-technology weapons, such as jet aircraft and helicopters, can be negated by camouflage, heat shields, decoys and dispersion. However, these systems can have a major impact on the local populace.
3. The support or neutrality of the local populace is essential for logistics support, intelligence and survival. Local guerrillas have a natural advantage. Non-local guerrillas gain or maintain support by frequently passing units through disputed areas, conducting shelling attacks and mining incidents to depict strength and activity.
4. Sanctuary is essential. Safe areas in Pakistan and Iran were vital to guerrilla bands for supply, medical treatment, resting, training and refitting. The Soviets carefully observed the international borders, although the locals and guerrillas did not.
5. Logistics support is essential, particularly as the insurgency grows and acquires heavy weapons. Logistics support may involve establishing depots and supply points inside the country and then defending them. Cash is often preferred to actual supplies. If aid is given in supplies, cash should also be provided for transport.
6. Close combat is the preferred option. It is best to get close to the enemy for the flat-trajectory fight where the enemy cannot use his artillery, mortars and aircraft.
7. When deploying heavy weapons, firing sites must be carefully prepared so that the weapons can be quickly moved out of the area or into a bunker or cave. Ambushes, raids and shelling attacks must be rapidly executed and the sites rapidly evacuated to avoid retaliation.
8. Communications are hard to maintain and readily intercepted. Messengers, visual signals and meetings are more secure than radio.
9. Publicity and media support is essential but tough to attain. Western journalists do not always want to travel to where the fighting is.
10. Adjustments in tactics are necessary only when enemy technology dictates that change. The anti-personnel land mine and the helicopter gunship were new technology that threatened traditional war-fighting and forced changes in guerrilla tactics.

The Insurgency

There was both a religious-based and a secular insurgency. The religious-based insurgency began in the early 1970s on the campus of Kabul University. The Islamic Youth movement found several adherents, including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Burhanud-din Rabbani. After brushes with the law, they fled to the countryside and then on to Pakistan to oppose the king. When the king was overthrown, other dissidents joined their cause to fight the new president. However, the religious-based insurgency was a relatively small movement.

When the president was overthrown by a communist coup, the insurgency grew with the addition of guerrillas opposing the atheism of the new movement. However, the main opposition was secular. It was a rural rebellion opposed to the communist reforms in land ownership, women's rights and rural landlord-renter relations. When the Soviets intervened, the insurgency grew dramatically. Initially, however, it was a secular-led rebellion with the primary goal to expel the Soviets. The fact that the Soviet Union was an atheist state aided the cause. The insurgency became more of a religious struggle as the religious-based aid distribution scheme began to distribute significant amounts of military weapons and supplies.

There was no common vision of the type government that a successful insurgency would create. Some factions wanted to restore the monarchy. Others wanted to create a secular republic. Others wanted to create a moderate Islamist state governed by Sharia law. Still others wanted to create an Islamic Emirate governed by strict Sharia law. Some of the most radical saw Afghanistan as the center of a radical Islamist movement that would spread across the region and beyond.

The professional military officers who quit the Armed Forces of Afghanistan were generally kept from key leadership roles in the insurgency. The fundamentalist religious leaders saw them as threats to their positions and as being too secular. The secular leaders saw them as threats to their positions. Some military personnel led guerrilla bands, but many more served as staff officers--planning actions, coordinating logistics, conducting training and providing intelligence analysis.

The insurgency enjoyed popular support throughout the country, but was centered in the rural villages. The more-liberal city dwellers were more tolerant of reform and change, but many still resented the presence of Soviet armed forces. Small urban guerrilla cells formed in the cities, but their freedom of movement, and prospects of survival, were limited. Throughout the insurgency, the guerrillas tried to capture and hold a city in which to proclaim a provisional government, but they never succeeded (Orgun was the city that the Mujahideen tried to capture most often).

The Mujahideen were joined by foreigners from around the Islamic world. They brought money and international support with them. Their presence caused a deal of friction with some factions, since the foreigners were considered prima donnas who were there for Jihad-credit. They were considered ill-disciplined, unwilling to share the burdens of campaigning and had a reputation for executing DRA prisoners in front of video cameras. DRA prisoners were usually conscripts and the Mujahideen usually offered them a chance to switch sides and paroled them home if they did not.

Material support of the insurgency came from a variety of states with a variety of motives:

- a. The United States, smarting from the support that the Soviet Union had provided North Vietnam and the Vietcong during the Vietnam War, looked on aid as a way of reciprocating and giving the Soviet Union “a bloody nose”. NATO allies Britain, France, Italy and West Germany provided varying aid in support of the United States effort.
- b. China and the Soviet Union were competing for control of the world communist movement and inroads into the third world. China and the Soviet Union had recently fought each other in border skirmishes along the Ussuri river in the Far East. China aided the insurgency to support its contest with the Soviet Union.
- c. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates supported the insurgency as a Sunni reaction to an atheist invasion of another Sunni state. Clergy within those states, particularly those of the Wahabbi sect, provided private funding, and proselytizing, to the insurgency.
- d. Pakistan and Iran helped the insurgents since they felt their own borders were threatened by the Soviet Union. They were also maneuvering politically in order to strengthen their claims to disputed territory with Afghanistan.
- e. Islamic clergy in many lands conducted fund raising in support of the insurgency. The Deobandi and Wahabbie sects provided funding as did Sufi and Shia communities.
- f. The refugees in the Iranian and Pakistani camps provided aid--not so much financially as morally. Mujahideen families were usually in the camps. The camps were also fertile recruiting grounds for new Mujahideen.

The Government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan

The DRA had most of its support in the cities. Although it tried to follow the Marxist-Leninist model for establishing socialism/communism throughout the countryside, its power in the countryside was limited to army garrisons, province capitals and district capitals, key economic facilities and main roads. Many of the district capitals were not under DRA control. Several district “governments” might be crowded into one capital since the DRA officials could not govern, let alone survive, in their appointed place of duty.

The DRA tried a variety of programs, included armed propaganda teams, to win the populace over. The armed propaganda teams provided free food, medical treatment and plays to villagers as they traveled from village trying to drum up support.

The DRA, realizing that their atheist trappings were costing support, tried to incorporate Islam into the government. They created a Ministry of Religious Affairs to try to patch over differences and support friendly clergy. To garner the support of non-party members, non-communist officials were designated throughout the government. However, the DRA government faithfully copied the Soviet model. The KHAD was a copy of the KGB—a strong, uniformed service that maintained a separate armed force. The Sarandoy mimicked the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) as an armed police force with military capability. Young Afghan communists copied the Soviet Komsomol members in trying to rally support to the government while spearheading movements in the countryside. DRA armed propaganda teams visited rural villages to put on plays, provide medical aid and attempt to rally support. The DRA also raised, armed and funded local militias to protect their villages from the Mujahideen.

The KHAD (later the WAD), provide the most accurate HUMINT on Mujahdeen forces. The KHAD ran agent nets and paid informers to provide intelligence for DRA and Soviet forces to act on. The most serious defect of the KHAD net was that agents were frequently days away from their handler and by the time they had hiked out with the information, the information was dated and often useless. Still, the KHAD provided the best HUMINT available to the DRA and Soviet forces. The KHAD also emulated the KGB in interrogation techniques and infiltration of the DRA Armed Forces. It was the regime's insurance that it would not be replaced in the same fashion that it had replaced the Daoud government.

The Sarandoy served as a national police force, but their armaments surpassed the traditional police arms of pistol, baton and shotgun. The Sarandoy constituted a third ground force within the DRA. They had heavy armaments, armored personnel carriers and a separate command and control system. The DRA Army, KHAD and Sarandoy often worked together out of necessity, but they were separate, rival systems designed to counterbalance one another and prevent regime ouster. It was not an efficient, or particularly effective design, but the DRA was designed for regime survival, not efficiency or effectiveness. Furthermore, the DRA leadership saw their chief threat as internal subversion within the communist party instead of the rural Mujahideen.

The DRA Armed Forces were also based on the Soviet Armed Forces, and their organization, equipment, training and command and control were Soviet-furnished or inspired. Soviet military advisers served down to the separate battalion level. DRA air defense units, chemical units, armored and mechanized units emphasized that this army was organized for conventional combat, not counterinsurgency. Many, if not most, of the professional officer corps from the royal and Daoud regimes had left to join the resistance or had been purged by the communists. Many of the officers educated in the Soviet Union also left or were purged. Desertion, poor leadership and poor morale plagued this conscript-based army. DRA outposts were surrounded by dense anti-personnel minefields—emplaced as much to keeping the conscripts from deserting as to keeping the Mujahideen out. Loyalty within the DRA Army was suspect and riddled with Mujahideen sympathizers and informants. The Soviet military was reluctant to share operational data and planning with the DRA, since the information was often leaked to the Mujahideen. There were some excellent Afghan Army units. The 38th Commando Brigade was a premier force until it was destroyed on hot landing zones during the opening of the Second Battle of Zhawar. The 15th Tank Brigade was a first-rate unit that became the regime's ready reaction force, moving from point to point where the demand was the greatest and armor could operate.

The government and economic structure of the DRA were also poor copies of the Soviet Union. Soviet political, bureaucratic and economic advisers worked with their Afghan counterparts attempting to create another "socialist workers paradise" in Afghanistan. Although token non-communists occupied some "show place" positions within the government, the communist party was clearly in control. During the war, the DRA even allowed some non-communist political parties, but they were controlled and directed by the communists.

The Soviet 40th Army

The Soviet 40th Army was originally composed of the 5th Motorized Rifle Division and the 180th Motorized Rifle Division (both mobilization divisions) and the 103rd Guards Airborne Division. The first two divisions, drawn from the Central Asian Military District, contained a high number of Uzbeks, Turkmen, Tajiks and Kyrgyz—traditionally Islamic peoples. Shortly afterwards, the 201st Motorized Rifle Division entered the country. It was also drawn from the Central Asian Military District. Only the airborne division was a ready division. The others drew on reservists from the region—mostly Central Asians with some form of Islamic tradition in the family past. Most of these reservists were withdrawn within 12 months of their commitment and replaced by new conscripts drawn from across the Soviet Union. Much has been made of this replacement in the West. The inference drawn was that the Central Asians proved unreliable, sympathetic to their Islamic brothers or even a fifth column for the propagation of fundamentalist Islam within the Soviet Union. While there may be some elements of truth in these allegations, the simple fact is that they were reservists and their reserve time was up. The Supreme Soviet would have had to pass a law extending their time and it was not worth it.

The Soviet 40th Army was outfitted for war on rolling plains with NATO or China. The 40th Army brought its full complement of tanks, air defense artillery, chemical protection units and all the other paraphernalia for conventional war against a modern mechanized force. Soon, the Soviets began sending home tank and air defense regiments and brigades and replacing them with more infantry. Tactics, troop formations and equipment were modified or replaced to meet the onerous conditions of Afghanistan. More helicopters and SU-25 close air support aircraft were brought into the fight. The Soviet Army was an artillery army with a lot of tanks. Unfortunately for the Soviets, neither the tank nor the artillery piece was to dominate the fight. The Soviets needed lots of light infantry and engineers—which they never had enough of. Soviet war-fighting was built around operational success. The Soviets developed and perfected the operational art during World War II and intended to defeat NATO and China on the operational level. Operational flexibility demands a deal of tactical predictability and rigidity. Battle drills were the basis of Soviet squad and platoon tactics. Afghanistan could not be fought on the operational level. It was a tactical fight that demanded tactical flexibility. The Soviets had to reinvent tactics in the middle of a conflict.

It was also a secret war. During the first two years of the conflict, the Soviet press covered the death of some two dozen servicemen—though thousands had already died. Whenever Afghanistan was mentioned in the Soviet press, it showed happy Soviet servicemen building orphanages—while neglecting to mention their role in filling them. The Soviet public was kept in the dark. When a dead Soviet soldier was returned to his family, the family was sworn to secrecy in order to get the body back for burial. Even the earlier tombstones did not list where the serviceman had died, only that he had died “fulfilling his internationalist duty.”

Afghanistan was not a sought-after assignment. Parents paid hefty bribes to keep their sons away from the conflict. After initial training, conscripts spent the rest of their two-year obligation in the war. Unlike the US experience in Vietnam, the entire officer corps did not go to Afghanistan. Less than 10% of the motorized rifle officers served there, but over 60% of the

airborne, air assault and Spetsnaz officers served. Interestingly, the tactics of the airborne, air assault and Spetsnaz changed after the war—while the armor and motorized rifle tactics did not.

Soviet Lessons Learned from the War

1. Guerrilla war is a contest of endurance and national will. The side with the highest moral commitment will hold the ground at the end of the conflict. Battlefield victory is almost irrelevant.
2. Air domination is irrelevant unless precisely targeted.
3. Secure logistics and lines of communication are essential.
4. Conventional tactics, equipment and weapons require major adjustment or replacement.
5. Conventional war force structure is inappropriate.
6. Tanks are of limited value except as mobile reserves and a security element in cities. Light infantry and engineers are at a premium.
7. Medical support is paramount.
8. Logistics determines the scope of activity and force size either side can field.
9. The information battle is essential to maintaining external and internal support.

The Mujahideen Backers

Sanctuary, training and logistics support were essential to the viability of the Mujahideen movement. Sanctuary was provided by Pakistan and Iran. Despite the uncertain borders, and the refusal of all Afghan governments to recognize the Durand line, the Soviets conscientiously kept their regular forces from violating the frontier and their air forces from over-flying the border. Naturally, the Mujahideen concentrated supplies and forces just over the border. The Pakistani ISI, the United States and Britain provided training. The United States, Britain, France, Italy, West Germany, China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates provided logistics support. One of the more controversial systems provided the Mujahideen was the US Stinger shoulder-fired air defense missile. This deadly, man-portable missile did not knock down anywhere near the number of Soviet aircraft that the Mujahideen and US backers claimed. However, this does not mean that the Stinger was ineffective. The Soviets completely revamped their aerial tactics to avoid losses to Stinger. High-performance jet aircraft flew at 15,000 feet where they were safe from the Stinger, but also ineffective. Helicopter gunships no longer ranged over the countryside, but flew in the relatively safe air space above Soviet ground forces. Transport and passenger aircraft kicked out strings of decoy flares during take off and landing.

Despite the aid, the Mujahideen backers often had difficulty controlling or directing the actions of the resistance. The independent nature of the Afghans meant that outsiders were not calling the shots. The Mujahideen would cooperate with their backers when it was to their advantage or when the backer withheld aid to force compliance. For example, the Soviets ran tactical pipelines from the Soviet Union down the eastern and western corridors of Afghanistan. They pumped diesel and aviation fuel through these pipelines. The pipelines were an easy target and lost fuel had an immediate effect on the Soviet effort. The Mujahideen had no desire to attack pipelines since there was no glory in it. Their warrior mythos overrode military

common sense. The Mujahideen backers bribed, cajoled or withheld aid in order to get the pipelines attacked.

The backers had even less success in hammering together a workable coalition of Mujahideen to work together over an extended period of time. The Mujahideen were tactical fighters and extended operations had little appeal. The military officers in the Mujahideen ranks were occasionally successful in mounting and sustaining an operation, but this was rare and limited to the static defense.

Most Mujahideen backers had promised some form of post-conflict aid once the DRA was deposed. Most analysts expected the DRA to collapse within months of the Soviet withdrawal. The DRA outlived the Soviet Union. The Mujahideen guerrillas were never united in their efforts and were unable to unite to destroy the DRA. Many Mujahideen went home. Their fight was with the Soviet invader and they had no interest in who was in control in Kabul. Often guerrillas returned home to join the DRA militia. The guerrillas were unable to change into a conventional military force. Independence, individualism and factionalism plagued these efforts. Gradually, the Mujahideen backers lost interest and turned to other pursuits. When the DRA finally fell and the Mujahideen crowded into Kabul, the backers were elsewhere and the aid never came.

Afghanistan lost over 1.3 million people, the bulk of them civilians, in pursuit of this war. The Mujahideen did not defeat a superpower, but they fought it to a standstill, then stayed in the fight until the Soviets tired and went home. The economy was shattered, the population was scattered in neighboring refugee camps and across the globe. The best and brightest were living in California; Virginia; Germany; Russia, France and Dubai. The society was shattered. It was no longer a liberal Islamic country under secular rule. Tribal law and mores no longer controlled the rural youth. Now Afghanistan had a fundamentalist Islamic orientation and was rife with schism and lawlessness. The Mujahideen was no longer an unpaid volunteer. Now, he was the man with the gun who could take what he desired. Anarchy rocked the nation and threatened its neighbors. Pre-war Afghanistan may have had a 10% literacy rate. Few children were properly educated during the war and fewer doctors, engineers, teachers and scientists were produced. Farming was at a standstill due to the loss of irrigation systems, orchards and vineyards. Mines and unexploded ordnance cluttered the fields. Warlords battled warlords as Afghanistan took the position as the one of the poorest countries on the planet—the country that led the world in infant mortality and death in childbirth. The Mujahideen could claim victory, but it was a hollow victory indeed—a victory that eventually spawned the Taliban movement and the bloodiest ethnic civil war in Afghanistan's history.